

“Worldly Goods Brings unique, fair trade products to Ames,” September 26, 2010

Upon walking into Worldly Goods, 223 Main Street, one is immediately overwhelmed with smells and colors.

The mission of Worldly Goods is to provide “a marketplace for artisans of the world to receive fair income and support for their families. Volunteers operate this not-for-profit organization and share the stories of the artisans.”

Worldly Goods offers a variety of products from more than 40 different countries, including coffees, chocolates, clothing and jewelry. It also offers other unique items, such as Kisii stone sculptures from Kenya and recycled paper tableware from Vietnam and the Philippines.

“Every item in this store has a unique human story behind it,” said Melanie Christian, manager of the store.

The concept started in the 1980s by merely going abroad, buying some products and bringing them back to the states to be sold. The concept evolved into the fair trade business.

It started as a small room over on Hayward Avenue, moved into the basement of Roy’s TV and has been at the Main Street location for the past 10 years.

Today, the store works with more than 45 vendors — including two in the United States — that are fair trade certified.

Christian has only worked for Worldly Goods since June, but has been a dedicated shopper for a long time. She still owns the first item she bought from the business — a silk multi-colored scarf. She has been in favor of the store’s mission since she first learned about it.

“I liked the concept,” Christian said. “I liked the products. I liked the uniqueness of everything.”

The products at the store are made from things that are readily available to those who make them. There is a necklace that is made from coconut and various nuts.

This jewelry is what is called vegetable ivory, to promote not using the ivory tusks of an elephant.

Greg Bruna, assistant manager of the store, has been at Worldly Goods for five years. With previous involvement in a store with an environmental angle, he felt right at home with Worldly Goods.

“I really am glad I got the chance to be here,” Bruna said. “What I love most about being here is being surrounded by the smells, textures and colors, rather than being in a cubicle.”

Bruna also likes being able to help customers find exactly what they are looking for, no matter how specific. Being able to close that gap with the particular gift from the particular country is something he cherishes.

Worldly Goods only has four paid employees, while the rest work on a completely volunteer basis.

“The people that come in here really want to be here,” Christian said. “Everybody works together, and everybody wants to see the store succeed, so it’s a very welcoming and warm environment to be in.”

One volunteer, 90-year-old Ardis Fincham, has been with the store since it opened. Although she is not as active as she used to be, she is still seeing the benefits from working at the store.

"I feel I gain more than I give," Fincham said. "It's the best thing I've ever done. I've met so many people from so many walks of life."

Working with Third World countries is something that Fincham has described as an eye-opener, but she also has valued her time with her co-workers as well. She looks back fondly on all the get-togethers and potlucks the employees and volunteers have had.

"It really kept us in touch," Fincham said. "It kept us involved, and it really kept us unified."

Fincham, Bruna and Christian all feel that Worldly Goods puts forward a message that they can all believe in and feel good about.

"It's great to be a piece of that change," Bruna said. "It's not a charity, it's a business model."

Worldly Goods has done several events to help promote its mission. The store offers shopping benefit events, fair trade house parties and educational sessions.

In October, Worldly Goods is celebrating Fair Trade Month. Every Thursday night, it will be highlighting a different country and offering a discount on products from those countries. From 5 to 8 p.m., it will be offering foods from those countries.

This year, the store has decided to focus on countries that have been hit by natural disasters. On Oct. 7, it kicks off the month with Pakistan. Other countries to be showcased include Haiti, India and Chile.